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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that compared the attitudes of students in a community school, designed and staffed to follow the Alberta (Canada) Community School guidelines, and a mandated elementary fine-arts school over the school years 1985-86 through 1987-88. Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological research model was used to: (1) identify the relationships between the community-school programs/processes and the ecological environment in which they occur; and (2) define the relationships between these variables. Data were collected through a survey of second-, fourth-, and sixth-grade students at the two schools in Lethbridge School District, Alberta, Canada. More community-school students reported participating in the school program with their teachers and parents than did those at the elementary school. The data suggest that the community-education process has decentralized the school environment, facilitating more student and parent participation. However, the process did not extend to increased participation in the school program with friends, neighbors, clubs, and local politicians. Sixth-grade students accounted for most of the difference. Three tables and two figures are included. (LMI)

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IMPACT OF A COMMUNITY SCHOOL ON STUDENTS' BEHAVIORS①

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IMPACT OF A COMMUNITY SCHOOL ON STUDENTS' BEHAVIORS[1]

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Abstract: This research project used an ecological research model to study the degree of change in the behavior of Second, Fourth and Sixth grade children attending an elementary Community School and a regular elementary School over a three year period.

Summary: Quantitative data indicates there is a significant difference between the children attending Nicholas Sheran Community School and Park Meadows Elementary School on the research variables participating in the school program with their teachers and parents, and no difference between the students' on the research variables participating in the school program with friends, neighbors, clubs and local politicians. Analysis of the population subgroups indicates Sixth grade children account for most of the differences.

INTRODUCTION

Many Community Education proponents claim that through involvement in the more democratic processes of Community Education, such as local representation and participation, citizens' lives are significantly changed for the better. The many diverse explanations of Community Education (Bass, 1973; *Beyond the Classroom Walls*, 1976; Decker, ????, Hickey et al, 1969; Seay, 1974) discuss the processes and programs mostly in terms of adult outcomes. Can it also be hypothesized that children, particularly those attending a Community School, are experiencing more democratic representation and participation in their daily activity and thus significant changes in their lives?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Community Education Process. Because of its broad conceptual base a wide variety of Community Education goals have evolved. Many of these are program-oriented and when a new Community Education program is implemented these often emerge first. However, it is the long-range process goals that provide a structure that can permanently impact childrens' behaviors and lead to positive change by them in the school and community environment.

When Community Education is implemented through the Community School model one of the long-range goals is to impact the school environment so that it reflects the philosophies of the Community Education process. Historically most Community Education policies include a strand that addresses the K-12 curriculum and is sometimes

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[1]This study was supported by a research grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. 1985-88.

referred to as community-based curriculum (*Beyond the Classroom Walls*, 1976).

Representative Community Education in Schools. The Community Education processes can structure the decentralization of many school functions and responsibilities to encourage more students' participation. The local school is often viewed as the desirable size to implement students' beginning experiences with democratic processes, such as participation in curricular activities, committees and increased Community School functions. This process becomes more indicative of the actual neighborhood functioning and the students future roles.

Decentralized democratic representation also facilitates two-way communication systems. Not only should concepts, ideas, messages flow out from adult groups within the school (teachers, administrators, support staff, volunteers) toward the students, but also students' ideas, messages, attitudes and feelings should be communicated back. In this circular motion of communication the Community Education process impacts students' behaviors.

As school power is vested in more representative, smaller groups that include students a sense of "school ownership" evolves. As long as students can exercise this ownership they learn skills (behaviors) for future decision-making and communication within their neighborhoods. In addition, the more representative decision-making process implied by sharing school power allows for students' problem-solving strategies to be implemented at the school level. Students can identify issues and needs, work with adults to develop and implement solutions for planned change and evaluate the degree of success or failure.

The Community Education process can include the decentralization of communication systems, problem-solving and decision-making processes in the environments of children as well as adults. In addition it can more accurately reflect the sociological components of the students' local neighborhood. The Community Education process encompasses a philosophical foundation and organizational structure that contributes to children improving and utilizing skills and talents, changing values and attitudes and enriching their knowledge base. This is the real promise of Community Education.

Defining an Ecological Research Model[2]. Bronfenbrenner (1976) suggests that the outcomes of programs and processes are systems-oriented and dependent upon a complex interaction of units within the total system. A negative or positive development - i.e. change - in one of the units has effect upon other units. There is an interdependent ripple effect that needs to be accounted for in community-based research.

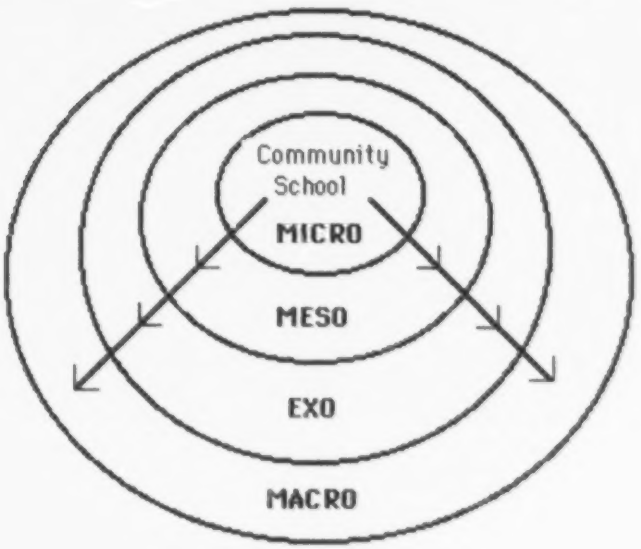
Adapting his model to Community Education, it (1) identifies the relationships between the Community School programs and processes and the ecological environment in which they occur, and (2) defines the relations and interconnections that exist between these variables.

2For a more complete discussion of this research model, including a statistical analysis, refer to Jones, L. and E. Falkenberg. (1991) The ecology of a Community School. *Community Education Research Digest*. Vol. 5, No. 1.

Bronfenbrenner defines this research model as an ecological experiment which is the "...systematic contrast between two or more environmental systems...with a careful attempt to control for possibly confounding influences...(p.5)." The environment is conceptualized spatially as a set of circles nested within each other and each successive circle contains the previous one.

Brim (1975) identified terminology for the environments Bronfenbrenner (1979) described. The first is called the micro system, and it is the immediate environmental setting containing the Community School and it includes such variables as place, periods of time, activities and roles. The second circle is called the meso system and defines the environmental setting that contains the interrelations among the major systems that interact with the Community School, such as family and peer-group interaction patterns. The third circle is the exo system; it is an extension of the meso system and consists of formal and informal concrete social structures that impinge upon or encompass the other settings - informal social networks, service-oriented agencies and organizations. The fourth circle, called the macro system, is the environmental setting for the global institutions of the culture, or sub-culture, of which the micro, meso, and exo systems are the concrete manifestations, such as the political, educational, economical, social and legal systems.

Diagram 1
Representation of Ecological Research Model



PURPOSE

The purpose of this research study was to verify, using an ecological research model, that the Community Education process, via a Community School, impacted students' lives and consequently changed their behaviors.

For this study the following definitions were employed:

Community Education - "...a philosophical concept which

serves the entire community by providing for all of the educational needs of all of its community members. It uses the local school to serve as the catalyst for bringing community resources to bear on community problems in an effort to develop a positive sense of community, improve community living, and develop the community process toward the end of self-actualization (Minzey & LeTarte, 1972, p. 19)."

Community School - "...is consciously oriented to the community it serves. With the sanction of the School Board in cooperation with other local authorities and community members, there is formal commitment to use the educational process for both individual and community betterment (*Beyond the Classroom Walls: Community Schools in Alberta*, 1976, p. 1).

Students - Second, fourth and sixth grade students attending a local Community School and elementary school

Impact - The degree of permanent change of students' behavior over a period of time.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological research model, plus Brim's (1975) terminology, was used as the framework for assessing the impact of a Community School on students' behaviors. The areas of investigation were:

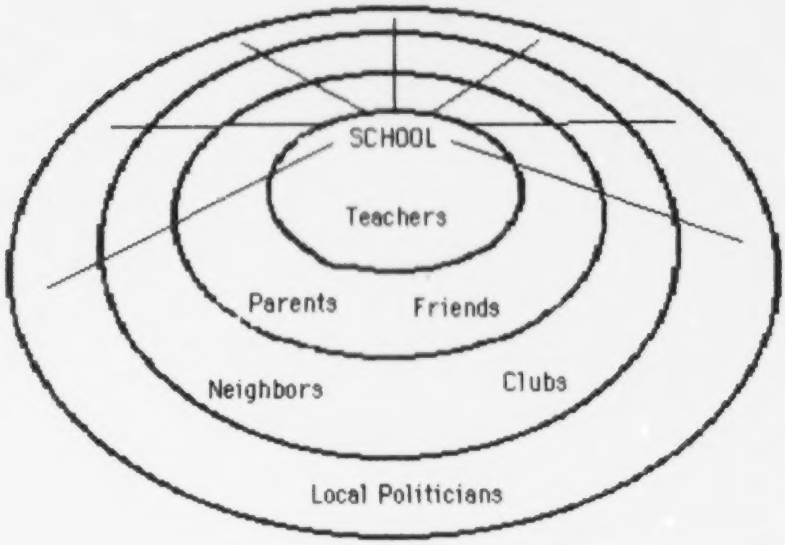
* in the micro system, defined as the immediate setting of a school, students' participation in the school program with the teachers was determined;

* in the meso system, defined as the interrelations between the major neighborhood systems and the school, students' participation in the school program with their parents and friends was determined;

* in the exo system, defined as an extension of the meso system and containing broader formal and informal neighborhood systems, students' participation in the school program with neighbors and in clubs was determined;

* in the macro system, defined as encompassing the interrelationships of global institutions of the culture, students' participation in the school program with local politicians was determined.

Diagram 2
Graphic Interpretation of Hypotheses



The Setting. In 1982 two new schools were opened in the Lethbridge School District #51 - Nicholas Sheran Community School and Park Meadows Elementary School. Both have very similar designs and are situated in neighborhoods of similar social and economic position. Nicholas Sheran Community School was designed and staffed to follow the Alberta Community School guidelines and thus encourages community involvement in the Community Education process. The staff includes administrators, support people, teachers, a Community School Coordinator and a part-time Community-Based Curriculum specialist. In addition, a Community School Local Advisory Council functions as part of the Community Education process. Park Meadows Elementary School is mandated to be a fine-arts elementary school and encourages parent involvement through the curriculum program. In 1986 a Parent Advisory Council was initiated in order to extend parent involvement.

Research Advisory Committee. During the research project the principal investigators have consulted and been advised by the principal of Nicholas Sheran Community School and Park Meadows Elementary School; two Nicholas Sheran Community School Coordinators and a Park Meadows Education Intern. They comprised the Research Advisory Committee which met to discuss various implementation strategies of the research project.

Research Sample. The questionnaire for students was delivered directly to each school and administered by each Second, Fourth and Sixth grade classroom teacher. Parents were notified of the impending study and in some cases asked to sign a parental consent form.

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Table 1
Research Samples

Population	Nicholas Sheran			Park Meadows		
	85/86	86/87	87/88	85/86	86/87	87/88
Students	233	234	235	240	245	239

Instrumentation and Administration of the Questionnaire. The questionnaire, which required responses to questions identified as representing the micro, meso, exo or macro environmental settings, was answered by each Second, Fourth and Sixth grade student. The teachers were asked to read an instruction sheet explaining the rights of the students as research subjects and providing instructions for administering the questionnaire. In addition, they were asked to discuss with the students definitions of key words and concepts used in the questionnaire.

The return rate for both schools for all three years was 100%. Item reliability was high for the questionnaire: 1985/86 = .83; 1986/87 = .83; 1987/88 - .81. Item reliability for all three years (1985-88) combined data is .82.

Students' Demographics. Demographic information was not gathered for students and it was assumed they would represent a similar profile as the surveyed adults (Jones & Falkenberg, 1991). Female and young adults answered and returned the survey more often than other age groups, although a wide age range was represented. Most had completed a high school, a technical, trade or business school, or a university or college degree. Although the income section had the largest no response percentage of any of the demographic categories the data still reflected that most of the respondents belonged to a high middle-income group. An overwhelming majority of the people surveyed were married and, as expected, lived within the local school boundaries. A chi-square analysis indicated no significant differences between Nicholas Sheran and Park Meadows questionnaire respondents for all demographic categories.

FINDINGS

Students' Behaviors. An analysis of variance indicated a statistical difference between Nicholas Sheran and Park Meadows students about their participation in the school program with teachers and parents; but no significant difference between the students on the research variables of their participation in the school program with friends, neighbors, clubs and local politician.

Table 2
1985-88 Students' Behaviors By Schools

Ecological Environments	F	Prob
Micro system		
Teacher	8.55	**.004**
Meso system		
Parents	4.84	**.03**
Friends	.44	.51
Exo system		
Neighbors	.36	.55
Clubs	1.01	.32
Macro system		
Local politicians	.41	.52

When the students' category was separated into the three subgroups (Second, Fourth and Sixth grade students) there were significant differences between students on the variables participation in the school program with teachers, parents, friends and clubs but none on the variable participation in the school program with local politicians.

Table 3
1985-88 Students' Behaviors By Schools and Grades

Ecological Environments	Grade 2		Grade 4		Grade 6	
	F	Prob	F	Prob	F	Prob
Micro system						
Teachers	.02	.88	.41	.52	15.02	**.000**
Meso system						
Parents	.68	.41	.20	.65	5.85	**.02**
Friends	3.14	**.08**	.46	.50	.07	.80
Exo system						
Neighbors	3.40	**.07**	.52	.47	.13	.72
Clubs	.16	.69	5.49	**.02**	.02	.89
Macro system						
Local politicians	1.59	.21	1.07	.30	.02	.89

When the research variables were collapsed to form the environmental systems there was a significant difference between the behaviors of students from each school in the micro system, but not the meso, exo and macro systems. When the students category is divided into subgroups there were significant differences in the micro, meso and exo systems between the Grade 4 and Grade 6 students but not the macro. There were no differences on any of the collapsed variables for the Grade 2 students.

Table 4
1985-88 Students' Behaviors on Collapsed Variables By School and Grades

Ecological Environments	All Students		Grade 2		Grade 4		Grade 6	
	F	Prob	F	Prob	F	Prob	F	Prob
Micro	8.55	**.004**	.02	.88	.41	.52	15.02	**.000**
Meso	1.32	.25	.38	.54	.47	.49	4.28	**.04**
Exo	.05	.82	1.79	.18	3.70	**.06**	.03	.86
Macro	.41	.52	1.56	.21	1.07	.30	.02	.89

CONCLUSIONS

Impact on Students' Behaviors Between Schools: analysis of the students' data demonstrated significant differences between the schools in the ecological environments that are closest, in terms of relationships, to the school. It is suggested students at Nicholas Sheran Community School reported participating in the school program with their teachers and parents more than the students at Park Meadows Elementary School. However when the research variables were collapsed to form the four ecological environments - micro, meso, exo and macro - only the micro retained it's significant statistical difference.

With this finding it can be suggested that the Community Education processes at Nicholas Sheran Community School have decentralized the school environment so that more representation and participation by students occurs, thus more interactions with their teachers within the school context. The more democratic processes occurring at Nicholas Sheran Community School might also be reaching out to include the parents of the children, thus the significant difference between the schools, but not in a sufficiently altered mode from Park Meadows Elementary School to include friends, neighbors, clubs and local politicians

This finding is most intriguing because it illustrates a reverse picture from the results of adult respondents (Jones and Falkenberg, 1991). Whereas the Nicholas Sheran and Park Meadows adult respondents began to show divergence within the meso setting and this continued as the variables increased in attitudinal distance from the immediate setting of the school, students indicated a divergence with the micro setting and increasing similarities in the meso, exo, and macro settings which are farther removed from the school setting.

This outcome may result from the affectively and cognitively concrete nature of children in the Second, Fourth and Sixth grades. Their concepts and feelings of school are embedded within the physicality of the school. Perhaps then, for these children, any participation in the school program with parents, friends, neighbors, clubs and local politicians is only conceptualized as occurring in the school and not in homes, parks, stores, etc.

In addition, the proposed ecological research model assumes that behavioral interrelations are occurring simultaneously and

In addition, the proposed ecological research model assumes that behavioral interrelations are occurring simultaneously and include past (the school concept), present (micro, meso, exo, macro settings) and future (reconstructed interrelations) knowledge. This is sophisticated abstract functioning and is less "place" bound. Children, through the Sixth grade, have yet to make this intellectual and emotional leap.

Impact on Students' Behaviors Between Grades: Second grade children, although demonstrating divergence on individual research variables, lost any significant differences when the research variables where collapsed into the micro, meso, exo and macro settings. It could be concluded there are no dissimilarities between Nicholas Sheran and Park Meadows Second grade children. However, it is a likely, that these children had a difficult time comprehending the vocabulary and intentions of the questionnaire.

Fourth grade children showed differences only within the exo setting, particularly on the research variable participation in the school program with clubs. This may be illustrative of the beginning group and sports orientation of this age.

Sixth grade children reflected significant differences at the micro and meso, but not the exo and macro settings. When the data from all grades were collapsed the results closely reflected the findings of the Sixth grade students; thus, in future studies surveying only the Sixth grade students would be appropriate.

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